

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL  
FLEXIBILITY IN COMMUNIST REVOLUTIONARY  
WARFARE DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE**

**A Monograph**

**by**

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<p>This monograph examines primary source writings of leading Communist revolutionary warfare theorists to identify and isolate the essence of organizational flexibility. The objective is to gain an appreciation for the important theoretical and practical functions of this concept. This facilitates our understanding of its dynamic role when applied to insurgencies as an operational category of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC).</p> <p>This study concludes that the US Army can improve its tactical capabilities at the low end of the conflict spectrum by fully understanding the importance of flexibility in Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine. An understanding of flexibility as the conceptual nucleus around which guerrilla tactics revolve can serve to condition minds of military leaders and prepare them to counter the relative successes that Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine has enjoyed in Third World areas of conflict.</p>			
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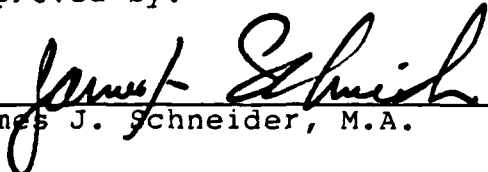
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## ABSTRACT

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL FLEXIBILITY IN  
COMMUNIST REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE,  
by Major Victor M. Rosello, Jr., USA, 43 pages.

This monograph examines primary source writings of leading Communist revolutionary warfare theorists to identify and isolate the essence of organizational flexibility. The objective is to gain an appreciation for the important theoretical and practical functions of this concept. This facilitates our understanding of its dynamic role when applied to insurgencies as an operational category of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC).

In their historical and politico-military doctrinal writings, Mao Tse-tung, Troung Chinh, and Vo Nguyen Giap developed organizational flexibility as a means toward achieving revolutionary success. Mao went to great lengths to define flexibility along with initiative and planning as one of his three tenets of guerrilla warfare. Troung Chinh attributed "flexibility of tactics" to the Viet Minh success over the Japanese. Giap regarded "suppleness" (flexibility) as one of the main components of guerrilla warfare along with initiative, rapidity, surprise, and suddenness in attack and retreat. Why did these classic revolutionary warfare thinkers emphasize organizational flexibility in their works? More importantly, would an understanding of its conceptual base benefit the US Army and its ability to prepare more effectively for LIC scenarios today?

This study concludes that the US Army can improve its tactical capabilities at the low end of the conflict spectrum by fully understanding the importance of flexibility in Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine. An understanding of flexibility as the conceptual nucleus around which guerrilla tactics revolve can serve to condition minds of military leaders and prepare them to counter the relative successes that Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine has enjoyed in Third World areas of conflict.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Of all the 'lessons learned' from the Vietnam war the need for flexibility in both thought and action is perhaps the most critical . . . The key word therefore is not 'conventional' or 'counter-guerrilla' but 'flexibility'-- the ability to react to rapidly changing circumstances 1

COL Harry G. Summers

Harry G. Summers' insightful but controversial study of the failure of the US Army to apply the principles of war to the Vietnam conflict is regarded a classic work in many military circles. Among the key points made by Summers, one in particular, tucked away in a corner of his book, failed to receive noticeable attention. By correctly identifying flexibility as a key element lacking within the US Army and the Army, Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) organizational practices during the Vietnam conflict, Summers went to the heart of the problem which continues to plague our fighting capability today. Unfortunately, after making his insightful assertion, Summers failed to offer any examples or practical solutions to demonstrate how the use of flexibility could have prevented the fall of Vietnam.

Though Summers' observation may be classified as a proverbial 'lessons re-learned' evaluation of past and present US Army practices, it is certainly not a new

historical phenomenon. Ironically, decades before in their historical and politico-military writings, leading Communist revolutionary warfare theorists, including some who the US opposed in Southeast Asia, had already recognized flexibility as a formal concept and a means of achieving revolutionary success. Why did these classic theorists include flexibility in their works? More importantly, does their concept of flexibility coincide with the problem identified by Summers?

This study focuses on the concept of flexibility as described by some of the most recognized Communist revolutionary warfare theorists: Mao Tse-tung, Truong Chinh, and Vo Nguyen Giap. A prime goal of the paper is to distill the essence of the concept of flexibility to gain a better understanding of its complexity. The essence of revolutionary flexibility is found in the primary source literature of these writers. As a result, in many cases direct quotes are cited to allow the reader to become better acquainted with these theories.

From the laboratory to the battlefield, an evaluation is made on how the concept ultimately manifested itself against the US Army during the Vietnam conflict. The study synthesizes over fifty years of Communist revolutionary warfare theory



and includes an assessment of Communist guerrilla tactics in El Salvador. The ultimate objective is to determine if an understanding of flexibility as professed by these revolutionary warfare theorists can improve the US Army's handling of insurgencies as an operational category of Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) today. This paper also examines the implications that a formal adoption of revolutionary flexibility may have on the US Army's tactical capabilities.

Realistically, in order for this study to be of value, some limitations and assumptions are required to restrict the scope of the effort. First, the analysis made of the concept of flexibility keys on its tactical organizational application. It is assumed that Summers intended his notion of flexibility ("the ability to react to rapidly changing circumstances") to be viewed in light of how a unit or an organization can react to situations, rather than its application individually or as a human quality. This point is important because as the study develops, a distinction between the US and the Communist view will become apparent.

Second, the study adheres to the utilization of flexibility as applied to the active military element of insurgent organizations. It does not address the dual nature of Communist strategy, particularly

that of the Vietnamese, which emphasizes the importance of a combined armed and political strategy to act as "ice tongs" which seize the enemy ('Dau tranh').<sup>2</sup> The paper focuses on the Communist tactical aspects of insurgency, not the political aspect of gaining support from the populace. A valid argument is that in Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine the two cannot be separated. This is in fact true, but only in light of the overall design and goals of the political party strategy. It is important to recognize that Communist military tactics do conform to some basic military tenets and principles. This allows for analysis outside the politico-military arena. It is on this basis that the discussion develops.

## II. FLEXIBILITY: AMERICAN STYLE

Within the US military the terms 'flexible' and 'flexibility' are liberally applied and basically understood as used by Summers in the opening statement: the ability to react rapidly to changing circumstances. Though Webster's 3rd New International Dictionary of the English Language (Unabridged) provides a more colorful and descriptive definition of 'flexibility' as applied to inanimate objects, for the purpose of this discussion the following definition of 'flexible' is in line with Summers' meaning:

Willing or ready to yield to the influence of others; not invincibly rigid or obstinate; characterized by ready capability for modification or change . . . and often by consequent adaptability to new situations. 3

'Flexibility,' in turn is defined as "the quality or  
4  
state of being flexible."

The US Army's basic warfighting manual, Field Manual 100-5, Operations, lists the term 'flexibility' primarily as a characteristic of both offensive and  
5  
defensive operations. The chapter in the manual which deals with the subject of offensive operations treats flexibility in a cursory manner and primarily states the need for the Commander to "expect uncertainties and  
6  
be ready to exploit opportunities." Flexibility is discussed in relatively more detail in the chapter

dealing with defensive operations with a description of the need for branches and sequels, detailed planning, organizations in depth, and retention of reserves as a method for ensuring flexibility. <sup>7</sup> Though FM 100-5 regards flexibility as an important characteristic of military operations, no attempt is made to define the term as is done with the tenets of AirLand Battle Doctrine (Initiative, Agility, Depth, and Synchronization). Curiously, two of the standard military references, JCS Pub 1, Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, and AR 310-25, Dictionary of United States Army Terms, do not even list flexibility.

Although somewhat academic, the purpose of addressing these issues is to establish that the term flexibility has either no precise US military meaning or, when used, implies a 'reactive' capability or characteristic. In a sense Summers criticizes the US Army and the ARVN for failing to 'react' properly to the strategy and tactics of the Communists. This implies that the US Army should have reacted to the Communists rather than setting the terms of battle or establishing the initiative.

Why is this issue important to the discussion? Because throughout the course of this study, it will become clear that for the Communists, flexibility is not limited to simply reacting. It strives to establish

the initiative by forcing the opponent to react to Communist strategy and tactics. In Communist revolutionary doctrine, flexibility is a necessary precondition to seizing the initiative.

### III. FLEXIBILITY: CHINESE COMMUNIST STYLE (MAO TSE-TUNG)

The discussion of Communist revolutionary doctrinal use of flexibility begins with Mao Tse-tung. It is only appropriate that his thoughts be considered first since his writings establish the basis for further discussions on revolutionary warfare doctrine. Douglas Pike's assertion that "genius is the ability to synthesize" is most appropriate when referring to Mao,<sup>8</sup> as well as to latter day Communist theorists.

Mao's most important contribution is the development of a method which incorporates many enduring concepts, particularly in relation to guerrilla warfare. This method becomes a basic recipe for a rural-based insurgency. He is the most influential adapter of Marxism to an agrarian society, changing its urban focus from the proletariat. Simply stated, his ideas are not revolutionary, but his application is.

Mao, more than any other Communist revolutionary warfare theorist, extensively discusses and analyzes the role of flexibility as an element of success. As a reflection of its importance, Mao includes flexibility along with initiative and planning in his writings on the basic tenets of guerrilla warfare. He defines flexibility as:

. . . a concrete expression of the initiative . . .  
 The concrete realization of the initiative  
 in military operations . . . The flexible  
 employment of armed forces [as] the  
 central task in directing a war, a task  
 most difficult to perform well. 10

From this definition one may assess that  
 Mao interprets flexibility as being either: (1)  
 the ability of correctly adapting tactics to achieve  
 the initiative; or (2) the recognition of what  
 military actions are necessary for a Commander to  
 retain the initiative. Initiative is defined as an  
 army's freedom of action as opposed to an enforced loss  
 of freedom.<sup>11</sup> Mao emphasizes this point in his  
 statement:

A guerrilla commander must understand that  
 the flexible employment of his forces is  
 the most important means of changing the  
 situation . . . and of gaining the  
 initiative. 12

Mao then identifies the three means of achieving  
 this purpose:

Dispersal, concentration, and shifting of  
 position (forces) are the three ways of  
 flexibly employing forces in guerrilla  
 warfare. 13

Simply knowing what needs to be accomplished,  
 however, does not guarantee success. The secret to  
 success comes from the "ingenuity in varying tactics."<sup>14</sup>

Ingenuity in varying tactics is, in the final analysis, what flexibility strives to accomplish. This is the chief contribution made by the Commander to achieving success.

For Mao, flexibility in the employment of forces serves one purpose: to seize the initiative and to insure success in offensive operations. <sup>15</sup> Mao firmly establishes that flexibility becomes the precondition for initiative. For this reason flexibility has a somewhat more complex character when compared to the US Army's view which simply reflects reaction to changing circumstances. In essence, Mao's goal is to maintain freedom of action (initiative) by changing the character of his own tactics: dispersing, concentrating, or shifting forces. This, in effect, allowed him to set the terms of battle to unbalance and confuse his opponents.

This Maoist concept of flexibility is the nucleus for the fluid nature of Communist revolutionary warfare tactics. Fluidity and flexibility are the secrets to wresting the initiative from the opponent, particularly an enemy guided by a rigid set of conventional warfare dogma.

Was this a new phenomenon? Hardly. It is widely accepted that Mao was influenced by the early classic Chinese warfare writers. He often quotes Sun Tzu in his



works. The following passages from Sun Tzu, vividly and metaphorically describe what Mao attempts to portray in his own writings:

Therefore, when I have won a victory I do not repeat my tactics but respond to circumstances in an infinite variety of ways.

Now an army may be likened to water, for just as flowing water avoids the heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strength and strikes weakness.

And as water shapes its flow in accordance with the ground, so an army manages its victory in accordance with the situation of the enemy.

And as water has no constant form, there are in war no constant conditions.

Thus, one able to gain the victory by modifying his tactics in accordance with the enemy situation may be said to be divine. 16

This understanding of the nature of flexibility and the tactics of dispersal, concentration, and shifting of forces explains why Mao stresses that in guerrilla warfare one should:

Select the tactic of seeming to come from the east and attacking from the west; avoid the solid, attack the hollow; attack; withdraw; deliver a lightning blow, seek a lightning decision. 17

The ability to set the pace of action is the essence of flexibility and a tribute to Mao's command and control of the Red Army during the Chinese revolutionary period.

Flexibility, however, does not stop at the tactical level. Mao recognizes that flexibility of action also extends into the operational or campaign level:

Because the circumstances of war are only relatively certain and the flow (movement and change) of war is rapid, war plans or policies can be only relatively stable and have to be changed or revised in good time in accordance with changing circumstances and the flow of the war. 18

To allow for the flexibility and fluidity required to sustain initiative and the offensive, Mao states that revolutionary war must be waged with three types of warfare: mobile, positional, and guerrilla warfare. Mobile warfare is defined as the operations of large units, normally regular forces, along extensive fronts and large areas of operation. 19 Positional warfare is defined as defensive operations in which terrain is occupied. 20 Finally, guerrilla warfare is defined as the use of small armed bands to attrite and disperse an opponent's force. 21

Mao sees guerrilla warfare only as a temporary form of warfare until it can rise to the higher form of mobile warfare. He does not acknowledge guerrilla warfare as being decisive in nature because it can not "shoulder the main responsibility in deciding the outcome." 22 But, he is astute enough to recognize

that unit flexibility capitalizes on the strength of the various forms of warfare. For this reason he is not opposed to the idea of regular forces conducting guerrilla warfare when dispersed and mobile warfare when concentrated. The fluidity and flexibility apparent in this marriage of action became the guiding principle of the Eighth Route Army: "Guerrilla warfare is basic, but lose no chance for mobile warfare under 23 favourable conditions."

Recognition that various forms of warfare can be in motion at any given time helps dispel the myth that Mao's three stages of protracted warfare are a rigid and lockstep progression of warfighting from guerrilla to mobile warfare:

In the first stage mobile warfare is primary, while guerrilla and positional warfare are supplementary. In the second stage guerrilla warfare will advance to the first place and will be supplemented by mobile and positional warfare. In the third stage mobile warfare will again become the primary form and will be supplemented by positional and guerrilla warfare. 24

Overall, one can conclude that these forms of warfare allowed Mao to develop the Red Army with the incorporation of peoples' militias and guerrilla forces to augment the regular forces. The entire framework of combat was a series of changes in strategy and tactics which extended over the

entire country at varying degrees of stages and periods. It was a masterpiece in flexibility, execution, and planning:

Mobile war stood as the centerpiece of the Maoist conceptualization of revolutionary military strategy . . . [It] required a commander and disciplined troops conditioned to flexibility and fluidity . . . to disperse to fight guerrilla fashion; concentrate rapidly to face a stronger foe; withdraw quickly when faced with overwhelming odds; and then switch to conventional (mobile) warfare to fight a set-piece battle or to conduct a siege. 25

#### IV. FLEXIBILITY: VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST STYLE (TROUNG CHINH)

Flexibility has been in common use throughout the history of Vietnamese struggles against foreign invaders. In fact the concept of tactical flexibility was "elaborated in the first Vietnamese handbook of the military profession in the thirteenth century!"<sup>26</sup> This military handbook was the first produced in Southeast Asia "which contained an innovative strategy that enabled the Vietnamese army to defeat the previously unstopable hordes of Kublai Khan."<sup>27</sup>

During the Vietnamese war of resistance against the French, Western interest in Vietnamese Communist thought developed as answers on how to defeat Vietnamese revolutionary warfare were sought. Though not as well known as Vo Nguyen Giap or Ho Chi Minh, Communist strategist, Troung Chinh, wrote accounts of the Viet Minh's response to the Japanese occupation of Vietnam from 1945-47 and subsequent French reoccupation of Vietnam. He is credited for laying the groundwork for future writings, particularly those of Giap. His treatise, "The Resistance Will Win," is a particularly well written and concise work which outlines the basic concepts that influenced the strategy and tactics of the Vietnamese Communists in the '60's.

Troung Chinh attributes "flexibility of tactics"

to the success the Viet Minh achieved over the Japanese  
28  
occupation forces. His initial use of the term is  
related to the descriptions of the myriad of political  
actions (armed propaganda, demonstrations, limited  
attacks) used to confront and resist the Japanese  
and is devoid of any theoretical innovations like those  
extracted from Mao's writings.

The influence of Mao is apparent in Chinh's  
descriptions of the military and tactical problems  
faced by the Viet Minh against the French. Although his  
treatise references flexibility in general ("to  
maneuver with flexibility" and "to apply flexible  
29  
tactics"), Mao's influence is more pronounced in the  
proper combinations of the forms of operational level  
warfare (mobile, positional, and guerrilla  
warfare) employed throughout the various stages of the  
resistance effort against the French.

Additionally, Troung Chinh appears to have a  
clearer understanding of these forms of warfare. He is  
more specific in defining their differences than is Mao  
in his writings. This refinement is a major  
contribution to the revolutionary art. According to  
Chinh, guerrilla warfare is defined as:

The method of fighting in partisan units or  
with relatively small groups of the regular  
army disguised as civilians and mingling with  
the people . . . They attack the enemy from behind,

outflank him or launch sudden attacks on his weak points. They pretend to attack the enemy's right flank while actually attacking his left, they concentrate for attack and disperse to dodge the enemy's reply. They cut communication lines, harass the enemy while he is eating or sleeping, wear out his strength, cause him weariness and distress, render his forces lame, lost, hungry, thirsty . . . . 30

Mobile warfare is defined as:

Fighting by the regular army, or by guerrilla forces mustered into relatively big units and cooperating with the regular army, using more or less advanced weapons, concentrating themselves rapidly and launching lightning attacks: encircling the enemy in order to destroy him, working round positions to attack him, attacking rather from behind than launching frontal attack, advancing rapidly and withdrawing quickly . . . The characteristic of mobile warfare is: to maneuver with flexibility to attack the enemy and destroy him. 31 (emphasis added in original translation).

Positional warfare is defined as:

The method of deploying forces of the regular army in readiness for a battle, digging trenches, setting up fortifications, checking the enemy's advance, taking advantage of the enemy's weak points and inadequacies to attack him and occupy his positions. 32

Although in contrast to Mao, Troung Chinh does not analyze the concept of flexibility as a component of strategy/tactics, he does recognize its associated component, initiative, and stresses it as a key to the effectiveness of the Viet Minh resistance movement ("To keep the initiative is the essential

principle in general, and of guerrilla and mobile  
warfare in particular."<sup>33</sup>)

Troung Chinh also recognizes that in order to be successful, a proper mix of guerrilla, mobile, and positional warfare must be waged in concert. He acknowledges that the proper mix depends on the "objective, subjective, and practical conditions at each particular time and place."<sup>34</sup> This application of flexibility again reflects the strong Maoist influence in Troung Chinh's writings.

In short, Troung Chinh's style of writing does not lend itself to contemplative analysis of the components of revolutionary warfare, such as the treatment of the concept of flexibility. He does recognize its importance, but appears to combine its effects with that of the concept of initiative and the proper adaptation or combination of tactics to meet certain situations. The influence of Mao is quite pronounced throughout his writings and it would appear that much, although definitely not all, of his doctrinal ideas can be traced to general Maoist concepts on protracted war.

As mentioned previously, Troung Chinh is a major influence on Giap and for this reason his contributions to the development of Vietnamese military art are recognized important.



V. FLEXIBILITY: VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST STYLE  
(VO NGUYEN GIAP)

Like Troung Chinh, the legendary North Vietnamese general, Vo Nguyen Giap, devoted the larger portion of his writings to addressing politico-military problems of revolutionary warfare at the strategic level. This should not come as a surprise since his position as chief strategist of the Communist military forces in Vietnam required him to mastermind the national and strategic plans for the conduct of the liberation wars against the French and Americans. Like his predecessors Giap also recognizes the importance of flexibility (suppleness). He lists suppleness along with initiative, rapidity, surprise, and suddenness in attack and retreat as characteristics of successful guerrilla warfare.

35

In reflection of his abilities as master strategist and tactician, his treatment of the tactical and operational levels of the military art revolve around issues dealing with the flexible combination of guerrilla and regular warfare:

An important requirement in military art is a skillful combination of styles of warfare that will respond properly to the concrete situation of a given place and time. Each style of warfare must be adapted to the balance of forces between the enemy and ourselves and to the strategic situation of each phase of the war. 36

Additionally, Giap understands that to execute the various combinations of warfare styles, the proper military organization has to be designed which executes a coordinated effort by the regular forces, militias, and regional forces:

Along with mapping out styles of warfare, we must also solve the problem of the proper organization and use of forces. Only by constantly attending to improving organizational method in order to respond to the needs of various styles of warfare can we have a basis for organizing proper implementation of these styles of warfare on the battlefield. 37

Like Mao before him, Giap understands that in the final analysis, ingenuity in varying tactics is what flexibility strives to accomplish. From his previous campaigns, particularly his victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu, Giap ascertains that the "conduct of the war must maintain a correct ratio<sup>38</sup> between the fighting forms." From Dien Bien Phu, Giap proves the efficacy of his plans and the success of coordination between mobile and guerrilla warfare as those fighting forms that ultimately challenged the US presence in South Vietnam:

In addition to the units which have to be scattered in order to wear out the enemy, it is necessary to regroup big armed forces in favourable conditions in order to achieve supremacy in attack at a given point and at a given time to annihilate the enemy. 39

Flexibility played a vital role in Giap's conduct of the Vietnam war, particularly after the massive influx of US combat power in 1965. The chosen strategy of the US was that of attrition. To work, the US Army had to force Giap to fight under conditions dictated by the US which would allow the technologically superior US Army to capitalize on its massive firepower and airmobile assets. "The Communists, however, had been and would continue to be successful in dictating the tempo of operations." <sup>40</sup> Giap's hand in the planning of Vietnamese Communist strategy could be felt pulling the strings that forced the US Army to react continually to his directed actions:

It becomes evident quite early on that the insurgents would stick to their strategy of protracted conflict: drawing U.S. units away from the population areas to allow continued access to their logistical base (the population); generating U.S. casualties to attrite the will of the United States to continue the war; keeping U.S. forces in remote, static positions when possible (Khe Sanh, for example) to inhibit their operational effectiveness; and deploying sufficient NVA forces to entice the Army away from populated areas. 41

Giap learned the lessons from Dien Bien Phu and the French experience well.

VI. FLEXIBILITY: SALVADORAN INSURGENT STYLE  
(JOAQUIN VILLALOBOS)

Since its formation in 1980, the failure of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) of El Salvador to select a common strategy is one of the major obstacles preventing unity among its five insurgent factions. Each faction advocates different forms and variations of Communist or Marxist-Leninist ideology with styles ranging from Maoist revolutionary warfare to Cuban style "Focoism."<sup>42</sup> What is lacking is a combined effort and agreement on how to conduct the insurgency.

Due to large insurgent unit attacks in late 1983, by early 1984 the Salvadoran Armed Forces High Command reorganized, putting its best field officers in command positions.<sup>43</sup> The Army then began a series of operations designed to keep the FMLN off balance and prevent the insurgents from massing for major attacks against isolated Salvadoran infantry battalions.<sup>44</sup>

As a result of qualitative improvements in the organization and combat effectiveness of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, in 1984 the FMLN reevaluated its revolutionary method and application of tactics. This reevaluation produced a more flexible approach toward insurgency. The adoption of combined guerrilla and mobile warfare tactics is reminiscent of

the Maoist/Vietnamese doctrinal lessons regarding flexibility discussed in the preceding sections.

An excellent primary source which outlines those changes in FMLN fighting methods implemented in 1984 is a recently translated FMLN document entitled:

"Concerning our Military Plans: The Military Strategy<sup>45</sup> of the FMLN." A careful analysis of this document reflects the voice of 'Comandante' Joaquin Villalobos of the Peoples' Revolutionary Army (ERP) speaking on behalf of the FMLN. For years Villalobos has been regarded the key military strategist and supreme self-appointed 'Comandante' of the FMLN. Though nearly all statistics included in this document refer to operations in eastern El Salvador (Villalobos' primary area of operations), his authority has generally been accepted by all other factions of the FMLN. Throughout this document the emphasis on implementing flexibility by the FMLN remains a major theme. The following excerpts serve to illustrate this point:

The development of the military strategy of the FMLN has gone through distinct phases which responded to each period of the war and to successive levels of our experience. These processes of growth each climaxed in new phases . . . .

In the previous period our military approach was based on the application of regular tactics, where the massing of force was the determining factor for striking large targets . . . .

[At] this stage of the war we need to move to combine with certainty, regular and irregular tactics, conventional war and guerrilla war, that is to say, the combining of guerrilla and regular forces . . . .

We now have the strategic mobile force and we must move to form guerrilla units which will constitute the instrument with which we will apply a new tactical mode to strike the enemy . . . .

The same regular strategic forces must learn to break up into small units to fight in guerrilla fashion and reconfigure in order to strike in the regular manner. We must learn and gain confidence in the fact that tactical superiority is not provided by numbers, but by the correct combination of our force and means with the terrain and surprise. This means developing the creativity of the commands.46 (emphasis added).

These passages are extremely important because they point to a correlation of doctrinal thought associated with Maoist/Vietnamese methods and the FMLN. These excerpts also reflect the adaptability and initiative of the FMLN, as well as its desire to improve flexibility within the insurgent organization. From this document it is clear that by mid-1984 the FMLN was modifying and adjusting to the dynamics of the Salvadoran battlefield. Tactically and strategically, Joaquin Villalobos sought military unity of effort within the FMLN.

Through the 1980's FMLN's adoption of Vietnamese Communist thought is more than a mere coincidence. Miguel Castellanos, an FMLN "Comandante" who defected from the FMLN in the mid-1980's, provides revealing

insights on the extent and degree of training and instruction offered by the Vietnamese Communists to the FMLN. Castellanos states that he attended a three month long politico-military course near Hanoi in 1983 as part of an FMLN delegation consisting of approximately fifteen members from four of the five FMLN factions.<sup>47</sup> Vietnam also offers courses lasting five to six months in duration on other unspecified topics. His course, which is offered to the higher level leadership of the FMLN, teaches the importance of psychological warfare and propaganda in targeting the US political system, particularly Congress. This ensures an integration of a "total war" at three levels: political, military, and diplomatic.<sup>48</sup> Additional instruction covers the importance of mobilizing and organizing the masses to support the insurgency. The intent is to apply these Vietnamese lessons to the situation in El Salvador.<sup>49</sup> Insights like those provided by Castellanos are important because they reemphasize the extent to which the FMLN allows itself to be influenced by Vietnamese Communist doctrine and training.

Accepting that a quick end to the war is not possible in the near term, reports indicate that a monumental step was again taken in 1985-1986 when all five FMLN factions allegedly agreed to adopt the Maoist/Vietnamese protracted war strategy as a common

strategy. Leading this effort were the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), another FMLN faction that has always advocated Vietnam-style prolonged war. The strongest opponent was Joaquin Villalobos who, although advocating a unity of combat effort, has always been at political odds with the FPL.

The FMLN's decision may be compared to events which preceded the Nicaraguan Sandinistas' adoption of an Asian strategy. In 1968, eleven years before their successful Nicaraguan revolution, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) made the decision to eschew the Cuban model for Maoist/<sup>51</sup> Vietnamese style people's war. Years later, another change was made to the overall strategy. This is another example of the dynamic nature of Latin American insurgent organizations and their constant search for tactical innovations and viable strategic alternatives to prosecuting insurgencies. It is this tendency that makes them particularly elusive and dangerous adversaries when left unchecked.



## VII. SYNTHESIS

The purpose of this study is to assess whether an understanding of flexibility as professed by Communist revolutionary warfare theorists can improve the US Army's handling of insurgencies as an operational category of Low Intensity Conflict today.

To accomplish this task the study commenced by initially establishing from official publications what the concept of flexibility means to the US military. This term is defined as the capability to react to changing circumstances. Apparently, the common English language definition of flexibility is accepted by the US Army because no attempt is made in official publications to modify the meaning or give it a more precise military flavor. The most important result of this exercise is the establishment of flexibility as having a reactive military connotation. COL Harry G. Summers' criticism that the US and ARVN organizations failed to be flexible in Vietnam clearly establishes that at least in his mind, the US forces in Vietnam should have reacted more effectively to North Vietnamese aggression. The negative implication of this statement is the acceptance that the US Army and the ARVN should have responded more effectively to North Vietnam's dictation of strategy and tactics, rather than a condemnation of a lack of US initiative. The

ironic point is that dictation of tactics and the general establishment of the terms of battle is clearly the purpose of Communist doctrinal teachings regarding the use of flexibility.

In the writings and thoughts of Mao, Chinh, and Giap overall agreement and continuity of thought is found to link their respective theories regarding the importance of flexibility to the success of military tactics. The overriding factor is that flexibility is viewed as a means of establishing initiative in operations to the degree that it appears to be perceived as a necessary precondition. This is an important distinction to note because it explains how theorists like Mao were able to justify the offensive character of operations regardless of whether in the context of a strategic defense or offense. Initiative and offensive spirit characterize the nature of Communist revolutionary warfare. Flexibility becomes the foundation of this initiative.

Flexibility is a state of mind that orients the commander toward setting the pace of combat on his own terms. To be flexible means to force the opponent to react. Flexibility requires that the commander adjust the nature of his operations through a flexible organization. The military organization must see itself as a fluid entity capable of dispersal and

concentration. A notional guerrilla regiment must be prepared to fight as a regiment or separate its elements into squads or teams at a moments notice. It has the capability to infiltrate or exfiltrate the battlefield at team level and then merge at a designated point and time for a combined operation where mass is required to deliver a decisive blow. The essence of this philosophy is what characterized the nature of Communist operations in Southeast Asia and which led to such confusion and incapability by the US Army to establish equal dexterity in its operations.

Understandably, the issue of labeling the Vietnam conflict as 'conventional' or 'unconventional' could not be established because the character of Communist revolutionary warfare defies conventional doctrine and wisdom. When the opportunity presented itself, both the Viet Cong guerrillas and the North Vietnamese regulars applied a military doctrine absent of conventions.

The final portion of this study synthesizes over fifty years of Communist revolutionary doctrine and analyzes the current military capabilities of the Salvadoran insurgent organization, the FMLN. From a captured document the voice of 'Comandante' Joaquin Villalobos dictates the important tactical changes which the FMLN implemented in mid-1984. These changes reflect a realization by Villalobos that the FMLN

needed to incorporate flexibility in its operations. The need to balance the ratio of guerrilla and mobile warfare tactics is a direct correlation between the Communist doctrine which has been analyzed in previous sections and the new military character of the FMLN. The allegation that the FMLN accepted a common strategy of Maoist/Vietnamese protracted warfare in 1985-1986, plus insights from a guerrilla defector of instruction received in Vietnam tends to also indicate a stronger doctrinal bond between the FMLN and Maoist/Vietnamese thought. The ominous character and the impact of this decision is still being felt in El Salvador today where at best the Salvadoran military, with assistance from the US Army, has managed to  
52  
maintain the conflict at a stalemate.

## VIII. IMPLICATIONS

What lessons can the US Army draw from an understanding of flexibility as professed by the Communists? More importantly, can these lessons be applied to improve the capability of the US Army to advise or to conduct operations in a current insurgent environment such as in El Salvador?

The primary lesson to be drawn concerns the nature of the enemy and the way he fights. Clearly, an insurgent organization follows a set of rules and doctrine which is different from our own. Though not addressed in this study, from a strictly military standpoint, the issue of combining political with military action further complicates an understanding of insurgent strategy. Militarily, though, the writings of FMLN strategy strongly indicate a common bond with Maoist/Vietnamese revolutionary warfare doctrine. This points to the combination of guerrilla and mobile warfare to establish tactical initiative in combat actions against the Salvadoran Armed Forces.

A critical point to note is that commanders of counterinsurgency battalions/brigades or those that advise them must understand the flexibility inherent in insurgent unit organizations and be prepared to respond to the sudden dispersions or concentrations of insurgent manpower. If the commander maintains his unit

concentrated, he can expect to be constanly harassed, sniped, ambushed, or heavily attrited by mines and boobytraps. If he maintains his sub-units isolated and dispersed without the capability of quick reinforcement and mutual support, he leaves himself open to the possiblity of guerrilla piecemeal destruction of these smaller tactical units. It's a tough decision that warrants an institutional search for solutions.

This lesson is important to US Army commanders and leaders of LIC Contingency units such as the 82d Airborne and the Light Infantry Divisions. Are US Army units prepared to fight on the terms set by the insurgent? Or are we prepared to set our own terms and conditions? More importantly, do US Army LIC contingency units have the necessary inherent flexibility to conduct guerrilla operations based on an understanding of Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine?

This author's impression, based on current US fighting doctrine, is that major US Army contingency units are generally not capable of executing the flexibility necessary to conduct operations on the same level as that required by Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine. Because of more important contingencies in support of a conventional war in Europe, units train for scenarios which depict

quasi-insurgency settings, such as the establishment of an airhead to evacuate American citizens in a country where insurgents are at the brink of overthrowing the established government.<sup>53</sup> Once US forces have been committed, these scenarios depict a guerrilla force eager to conduct 'conventional' operations as set piece battles are fought and where all the components of AirLand Battle bring the invading US force to a quick victory. If Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine is interpreted correctly, in a hypothetical scenario the insurgent would rely on his flexibility to establish the terms of battle as he would vie to wrest the US force's initiative. He would hope to draw the forces into a protracted affair which would once again test the will of the American nation. As Joaquin Villalobos notes:

The development of guerrilla tactics will open a field of military cooperation that will permit the strategic mobile force to defeat enemy objectives and assure our operational continuity. Accordingly, we will also secure our preparation to face the escalation of the war and even the invasion by Yankee troops. 54

The US Army can better prepare for the conduct of guerrilla operations or counter guerrilla operations in an insurgency by understanding the doctrine of the enemy to be confronted. It would be wise to put any future operation in the context of our experience in

Southeast Asia and recognize that we are probably no better prepared today to fight a foe who bases his operations on the successful heritage of Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine than we were then:

Sad to say, we cannot counter revolutionary war even now--our defeat in Vietnam has taught us nothing. After a lengthy study of "low intensity conflict" (which includes revolutionary war) a high-level Joint Study Group. . . concluded in a study dated 1 August 1986 that "The United States does not understand low-intensity conflict nor does it display the capability to adequately defend against it." 55

It is not impossible to train a major contingency unit to exercise flexibility in its organization or to prepare it for classic mobile/guerrilla/positional warfare, but it will require a major decision by the US Army leadership to enforce this action. Realistically, it is not necessary that an entire division be qualified in revolutionary tactical doctrine, only a handful of brigades or battalion-size elements from some of the major LIC contingency combat units.

During the REFORGER exercise in 1988, a light infantry battalion task force participated in support of a heavy division and demonstrated that the Light Infantry Division concept can serve as a viable test bed for the use of revolutionary style flexibility 56 in its organization. As part of its stay behind mission the Light Infantry battalion was able to halt a



three battalion OPFOR attack by:

concentrating their combined arms . . . and maneuvering around the heavy units to get a better angle at armored vehicles . . . The Light battalion (then) went into hiding and let the opposing armored force pass . . . After the opposing force passed, light infantry companies broke up into squads . . . The plan was for the squads to reunite and cut the opposing force's lifeline --- the main supply route that connects the force with its rear area base . . . While behind the enemy, the light fighters laid demolitions, ran ambushes and gathered intelligence. 57

Short of misutilizing Ranger and Special Forces units, the US Army would stand to gain from having, perhaps, one battalion from each LIC contingency division fully trained and qualified in the art of conducting revolutionary style tactics and able to exercise flexibility within its organization. This would improve the fighting skills of a unit expected to face an adversary drilled in the art of revolutionary tactical doctrine; it would expand the ability to project power more effectively into a contingency area while exercising economy of force; and would demonstrate that the US Army is in fact serious about combating insurgencies in the Third World. The message that this force capability would send to potential adversaries would further enhance US policy-making by adding an additional combat option to the US government's list of military options, thereby

enhancing the deterrence and power projection capability of the US government.

LIC contingency combat units should orient their training, not only on the geographical area, but on the fighting doctrine of potential adversaries. Many Latin American insurgent organizations, for one, ascribe to Chinese and Vietnamese Communist revolutionary warfare doctrine. Recognizing how the adversary fights and implementing similar doctrine into training programs and exercise scenarios could improve the fighting skills of these units for combat in this environment. It is also a way of ensuring that contingency units can serve the nation better and meet their commitments more effectively.

The concept of flexibility is a component part of revolutionary warfare tactics. A basic understanding of its philosophy may, in fact, be a better way of meeting those LIC contingency commitments by adhering to the classic Chinese adage of knowing the enemy, as well as yourself.

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